Networks of Racism in Online Games

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Declaration

I declare that the work described in this research Paper is, except where otherwise stated, entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

Within the field of ludology little has been written on the area of racism in video games. Even less research has been completed on the subject of racism in online games. Given the potential for racism to be created, disseminated and propagated through this ever-expanding medium, I argue that this area demands further analysis. In this research paper, I approach how the networks of racism in online games, allow each agent involved to circumvent accountability for their actions. My central research question explores the role of the player and the developer in the creation of racism, while exposing the agents that exist as a result of their presence. Within online games there exists a virtual space, one where offline identities are projected. This space is becoming saturated with racist content, but because a lot of this racism is presented as being humorous, it manages to discreetly make its way into millions of homes all over the world, being commonly perceived as a form of entertainment. The ramifications of this are, that people are becoming desensitised to racism. I start by exploring how identity is formed online. I then discuss one of the most predominant methods in which racism is disseminated across the Internet. Finally, I explore the issues of agency that surround each of the benefactors of racism in online games. Through this method of analysis, I frame the complex interplay that exists between the networks of racism in online games. This process provides insight into the impact that this type of racism, is having on both the online and offline world.

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Introduction

According to Frasca (Ludology, 2001), "ludology is the discipline that studies games, play, toys and videogames." For the purpose of this research paper I will be specifically adopting this term in relation to the analysis of videogames. Although racism in games has been extensively studied, little of this writing applies to online games. Over the last decade, this area of gaming has achieved rapid growth, both economically and in terms of users. Given the extent of this growth and the role that online games now play as locations of entertainment, social interaction, cultural production, virtual identity formation and most importantly how these processes have become interconnected with the rest of the Internet, separating these games from their offline counterparts seems like a logical conclusion. I present racism in online games as an area that demands more attention. The player's deep level of engagement with these games combined with their involvement in the creation of the online worlds that they inhabit, the online communities that stem from these and the manner in which content in these games is shared across the Internet, has led to the creation of a virtual space where players are becoming desensitised to racism.

The game examples that I have examined range from the Call of Duty franchise to Habbo Hotel, offering a dynamic approach, one that is considerate of large-scale models that pivot around social interaction. Using these games as case studies also allows insight into how more mainstream and mass-user driven games, can be misinterpreted and/or subverted to become environments that are associated with racist discourses. Also, the relationships that each of these games have with the Internet are explored in depth as I argue, that this connection assists in the dissemination of racist content.

My central research question explores the virtual space, looking specifically at the networks of racism that exist as a result of how games now occupy a considerable portion of online space. I have broken my findings into three chapters, each, dealing with a particular aspect of how racism in online games is being achieved, while also allowing for an interconnecting approach that accommodates the networked structure of these types of games. The overall topics that I address are:

- How does racism exist online?
- How can it spread virally both online and offline?
- Who is responsible for this racism?

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Stemming from these questions I not only confront the role of both the player and the developer in the creation of racism, but also expose the agents that allow racism in online games to operate in a unique space, one where racism can overtly saturate online games, while maintaining a discreet perception to those that are not actively involved with them. The concern here is that online games allow racism to be distributed widely, while also managing to create an unstable system of accountability.

Chapter 1 – Projecting Racism Online

1.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I examine how racism is generated and spread in online games. The construction of player identity online, communication practices and information sharing, all greatly influence how racism exists in the domain of online gaming. The use of avatars in online gaming embodies how racist behavior comes into play. The avatar is the location onto which the player projects their identity. Whether predetermined or customisable, the avatar initiates the visual presumptions that online racism stems from. Within online gaming, there exists a complex network of communication methods and information sharing. Racist language is often used to provoke enemies and manipulate their actions, while also generating comradery between allied players. As a consequence of this, information sharing plays an equally pivotal role in the spread of racism online, because games are now linked with a wider audience, beyond the individual gamer. For this reason it is vital that we challenge representations of racism in online games.

When looking at how racism is depicted in online games, it is integral that we assess the relationship that exists between offline and online identity constructions. Without understanding how identity is being constructed online, it is difficult to confront how racism is being disseminated and assimilated via the online gaming community. I explore the idea of identity construction using Nakamura's (2000) notion of "*identity tourism*"[*], versus the more contemporary envisioning of the online self, operating as an extension of the offline identity that creates it. The idea of a model in which race becomes something that can be visited is flawed and invokes the perception that race is a throwaway commodity. In addition, *identity tourism* disregards the potential for online identities to become transfers of those that exist offline. Nakamura (2000) refers to these concerns when she states that, "one of the dangers of identity tourism is that it takes this restriction across the axes of race/class in the "real world" to an even more subtle and complex degree by reducing non-white identity positions to part of a costume or masquerade to be used by curious vacationers in cyberspace". In offering a post-racial colourblind perspective, it assists in creating liminality where more mercurial interpretations are needed. According to Daniels and Lalone (2012, p.2) the Internet, "has shown that racial and gender identities offline are transported, relatively untransformed, into digital constructs, such as, video games".

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[*] Referring to the manner in which online identity can act as a site in which the other can be experienced as a separate entity from the offline identity that is operating it.

This idea that there is a process of transference that occurs between online and offline identities indicates the importance of assessing both the physical and the virtual together, rather than as separate entities. Only then can we begin to disengage with practices that create users devoid of responsibility. I intend to analyse three core aspects that correlate with these converging identities.

- The use of avatars and their inclusion as instances of racist propagation.
- The occurrence of "*racist griefing*" in online games.
- The process of live-streaming in online gaming.

In each instance I am using Call of Duty: Black Ops II (COD: BO II) as the primary source for examples. The reasons why I have chosen this game is due to the following factors; not only is it considered one of the most commercially successful games of all time, but it also has a strong emphasis on cultivating its online gaming community, which is one of the largest in the world. In addition to this it has obtained negative criticisms for being a breeding ground for online racism.

1.2 – The Avatar in Gaming – Representation of the Player

To support this discussion I would like to align myself with Techopedia's (2014) online definition of an avatar, which states that, "an avatar is a personalised graphical illustration that represents a computer user, or a character or alter ego that represents that user". The avatar is the primary area in which the player attaches their identity. Sherry Turkle (1995, p.178) proposes that, "the Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves". In this section, I interrogate this "cycling of the self" in online games, as in many instances the avatar that the player selects is pre-determined by the game developer. There are often limits to the customisation that online identities offer. Many online game avatars stem from the offline games that they are packaged with and therefore the flexibility of character selection is often mediated through the lens of the game's narrative. For this reason, the game's protagonist/primary avatar plays an important role in how the player projects their identity online.

Figure 1: (Source: Race + Ethnicity – Department of Sociology // Occidental College)

Figure 1 is by no means an exhaustive analysis of protagonists in gaming, but it does highlight concerns regarding how the avatar is being represented. Within the realm of mainstream gaming, the primary avatar that the player engages with is predominantly a middle-aged white male. This not only engages with issues concerning racial representation, but also concerns itself with the nature of gender in cyberspace. Donna Haraway's (1985) seminal essay titled "*A Cyborg Manifesto*" presented the cyborg as a presence that propagates discussion concerning post-gender and post-human bodies. Embedded in this framework is a racial hybridity that offers dissolution from fixed identities. In terms of gender in cyberspace, Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman (2000, p.7) postulate that, "if nobody knows your gender in cyberspace, a reading of Haraway seems to tell us, then perhaps while using the Internet you can enact that cyborg identity and be, at least in part, liberated from the constraints of gender". They then go on to assert that, "the cyborg is not only a hybrid of machine and organism, it is also a racial hybrid". If we are to perceive the cyborg as a being that is composed of both mechanical and organic parts, then can the avatar be viewed as the bridge between these components? In addition, if the cyborg operates in a post-racial environment then is the avatar the key to

transcending race? Such questions expose the power that the avatar holds as well as the potential that it has to transform how identity is perceived. Therefore, we need to address the role of developers within this structure, as they are the ones constructing the avatars that the users are attaching their identities to.

1.3 – Fixed Identities

Tyma and Leonard (2011, p.1) state that, "online identities need to be understood as continually changing representations, never fixed in one position, and perpetually in a state of assembly". Such an understanding fails to acknowledge the fixed avatars that inhabit game worlds, but also their role in offering the illusion of customisable identities in online gaming environments. Looking at the single player mode in COD: BO II, it is evident through the oppositional nature of the narrative, that an us-versus-them dichotomy is being promoted. This allows the game to endorse a pro-American perspective that is akin to propaganda.

Figure 2-3: Alex Mason (left) and his son David Mason (right) (The Call of Duty Wiki)

The game's protagonists are Alex Mason and his son David Mason (see Figures 2 & 3) and the primary antagonist is a character called Raul Menendez (see Figure 4). The two avatars that you inhabit as you play the game are Caucasian males, while the enemy is a Latino terrorist. As mentioned already (see image 1) this viewpoint is a common occurrence in mainstream games and is something that players have started to grow accustomed to. It also introduces the question, as this is one of the most successful video games of all time, where are the users positioned in terms of how they perceive racism in video games? Is it simply due to a lack of education, or has racism been packaged in a medium, in which its invisibility has allowed it to be appropriated into mainstream culture? This question will be explored in more detail when I refer to the practice of "racist griefing" in online gaming in the next subchapter. Prior to this, I would like to address the connection that the avatar has with the realm of online gaming.

Figure 4: Raul Menendez (The Call of Duty Wiki)

1.4 – The Fixed Avatar in Online Gaming

With most mainstream games that have an established protagonist (generally a white male) there is a process of transference that occurs in terms of how the player's online avatar selection is mediated. The customisable avatars that many online games offer, attempt to create a sense of unmediated identity construction on the canvas that the player maps their identity onto. This is either a direct version of themselves or an identity that they would like to tour. The concern with this is that many of the predetermined traits of a user and the realm in which they inhabit are chosen by the developer in order to connect with the narrative in the single player mode, as the online game environment is mapped from this. If we are to interpret this within the world of COD: BO II it is evident that the pro-American propaganda and obsession with the burly white male is imprinted upon its online multiplayer mode. So in terms of how a user can customise their online self, it appears that the focus is more on adapting the statistics, camouflage and weapons that you use to kill the other, rather than constructing a platform for individual identities to engage in warfare. This approach was implemented by the developers of the game and indicates that they are more concerned with militarising the player's experience, over creating a platform for individuals to connect with the realities of warfare. I would argue that this glamorisation of war requires a more considered approach, as without it user's online identities become objectified which leads to dehumanisation. This not

only impacts the player's perception of themselves, but also effects how they react to others within the game environment.

Concerns are also raised regarding this genre of online gaming holding such a dominant position in gaming culture. One could contest that just because the predominant avatars in these games are white does not inherently make them racist, this is open to discussion, but it does not disregard the fact that these avatars also exist in an online virtual warzone, where racism often becomes intertwined with the conflicts that are being played out. Given the mass popularity of these types of games, I would consider the analysis of their depictions of race a prudent and reasonable activity.

1.5 – Global Statistics

If we are to look at the online player statistics for COD: BO II (Call of Duty Elite, 2014), they state that the total number of hours played online is approximately 1,414,886,000 and this number is growing every second. With over a billion hours collectively spent in this online environment combined with the various different modes in which this content can permeate through online and offline worlds alike, it is imperative that the impact of racism in online games is discussed more actively. The avatar and its symbiotic relationship with the player (in terms of identity construction) is one of a number of networks, which must be analysed.

1.6 – Racist Griefing – Systemic or Enlightened Racism?

The act of racist griefing in games refers to the process in which players attempt to intimidate their opponents using racially offensive language. This communication practice is often perceived as a humorous exchange that exposes the absurdity of racism, while invoking competition and entertainment. Daniels and Lalone (2012, p.16) state that, "griefing in online gaming is similar to "trash talking" to opponents that might happen on a basketball court or a football field; in gaming, the griefing happens in online interactions, and often this griefing becomes explicitly racist". However, the impact of racist griefing in online games and the intensions behind it, is a difficult subject to understand. Is it a method in which systemic racism disseminates or is it attached to a post-racial sensibility, where humour has become synonymous with online racism? The Racism Review (2010) presents Nakamura's use of enlightened racism as, "a form of racist behavior and speech only available to those who are known, or assumed known, not to be racist". This plays upon the community aspect of online gaming and creates an arena in which racist griefing often flourishes, but the assumptions behind the intentions of this racism are incredibly detached.

1.7 – Approaches to Racism that are Considered to be Humorous

Crane (2000, p.89) states that, "cyberspace involves various degrees of masking, relying on the complex interplay between visibility, invisibility, and the performative representation of identity". Such a concept aligns itself to racism in online games in the sense that within a virtual environment it is difficult to determine racist intent. There is also no way of predicting how this racist humour will be interpreted when it shifts from the game realm to the Internet. In Psychology Today (2011) Greengross asks the question, "does racist humour promote racism?" In his conclusion he states that:

"We tend to think about humour as something that is innocuous, something that might be good for our health, moods, relationships and so on, but humour also has its dark side, and we should all be aware of it. Sometimes humour can lead to negative and harmful outcomes against others, and we should be conscious of when and how it can happen."

1.8 – Impact on Young Gamers

The importance of analysing the use of racist humour is extended further when applied to video games, as a large portion of the gaming community are a younger audience, who are less likely to understand the difference between systemic racism and enlightened racism. Nakamura's interpretation of this is presented in The Racism Review (2010), "this sort of humour is a confusing discursive mode for young people,' … because they are 'unable to separate enlightened racism from regular racism.'" This raises the question of whether these two states can even be separated? I interpret systemic and enlightened racism as being intertwined, especially in the realm of online gaming. To say that the intention is merely humorous, disregards vast degrees of unknown intent, while neglecting the capacity for meaning to change when content inevitably migrates to the Internet.

1.9 – CODcasting – Real-time Racism

In COD: BO II Treyarch (2012) added the capacity for players to "take on the role of a game commentator". This refers to "the ability to see all of the action in the game by switching between many different views, including a picture-in-picture mode that allows the player to toggle between the game camera and map top-down view". This addition made the game into a spectator sport, which in turn increased the complexity of how in-game information was being shared. The racist comments that plague the game are now part of a real-time narrative being absorbed and engaged by spectators all over the world. The

CODcasting feature also introduced the ability to live-stream league matches onto the Internet. Racism that used to be contained within the online gaming environment can now be disseminated through channels that rapidly spread content across the Internet.

1.10 – Racist Griefing as a Spectator Sport

  The enlightened racism that permeates throughout the COD: BO II online environment is now synchronised with larger networks than the gaming community that practices racist griefing as a humorous activity. It has now become a spectator sport. Within the games' online mode there are now commentators who are not playing the game. Instead they are commenting on the game in real-time. In some instances, commentators reinforce the racist griefing, creating a hostile racist environment. This real-time racism is difficult to moderate and can very quickly shift from being enlightened, to becoming a location of hardcore racism. What one user considers a joke can easily be adopted negatively by a larger group of players, or this content can be perceived as racist by another player/group of players. The manner in which this online commentary interconnects with live-streaming platforms, offers a wider area for racist dialogues to exist. As the streaming of games continues to grow exponentially this issue becomes more and more prevalent. An example of this can be seen on YouTube, which provides a platform for huge numbers of people to engage in debate via comments and video replies to content that is being streamed from games, but even more relevant is the live-streaming video platform called Twitch, which is dedicated to e-sports and video game streaming. According to The Wall Street Journal, Twitch is now ranked fourth in peak Internet traffic for the U.S. (Figure 5). Such a statistic indicates the extent to which content from online games is being consumed across the Internet.
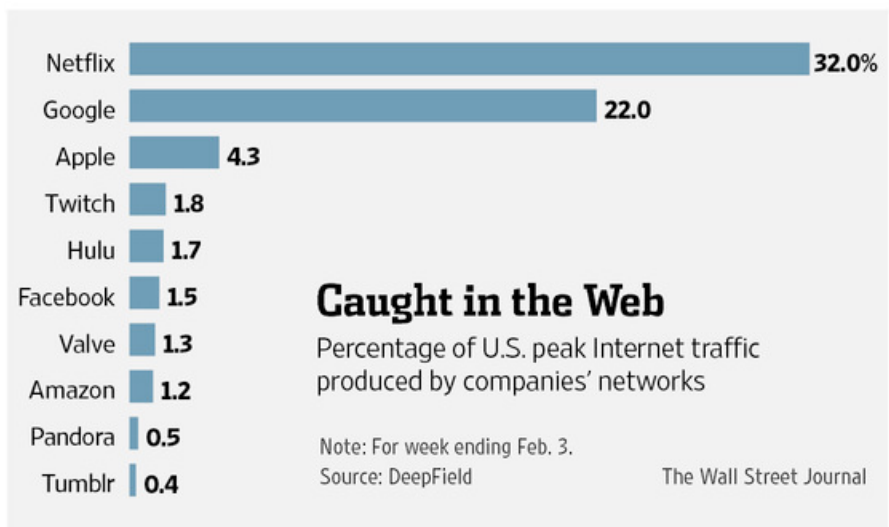
Figure 5: Peak U.S. Internet Traffic Statistics (The Wall Street Journal)

The real-time streaming options that CODcasting offers overtly highlights the direct connection that now exists between online gaming and the Internet. Games should no longer be assessed as separate entities (or texts), which are common practice amongst game theorists. The structuralist approach has its merits, but an approach that actively acknowledges the liminal nature of video games, combined with an increased recognition of their role within this system is needed. With the next generation of consoles being presented as entertainment centers, it is obvious that this level of integration will continue. This is evident in Sony adding a share button to their new controller (Figure 6) and Microsoft adding voice commands via their Kinect on the Xbox One for players to share their games online (Figure 7).

Figure 6: PS4 Share Button (Playstation-Techzone)

Figure 7: Xbox One Kinect (Forbes)

The use of stereotypes in online games now ripples out almost immediately onto the Internet, creating cyclical racism that not only spreads on online forums and discussion areas, but it also migrates back into the game's community under the guise of "humour". This perpetual cycle of racism needs to be more carefully considered by designers if we are to ever combat the racist discourses that are being generated from these environments.

1.12 – The Responsibility of the Developer

Throughout this chapter I addressed the need for developers to take responsibility for their depictions of race in their videogames. Using COD: BO II as a primary example, I looked at how the use of stereotyping is adapted by players to generate racist discourses. In addition to this the liminal nature of the relationship between online multiplayer games and the Internet, allows such discourses to rapidly grow. The primary components involved in this process are the identity of the player, racist griefing and the ability to spectate and live-stream such events directly onto the Internet. Moving away from notions of *identity tourism*, I presented the realm of online video games as a place in which the player projects their offline identity onto the avatar that they are playing as. Stemming from this I explored the idea of the fixed avatar as an embedded restriction that often moves from the game's offline mode into the online world that they inhabit. The use of global statistics on COD:BO II highlighted the amount of time that players inhabit this online game. Also, I focused on the process of racist griefing and explored whether it is merely a humorous activity amongst online gamers or does it have a negative impact? Aspects of its negative impact were explored by discussing how this type of enlightened racism is difficult for younger gamers to interpret. Finally, I looked at real-time racism that results from the introduction of CODcasting and in particular the player being offered the ability to spectate and live-stream their games. This process adds a virality to these games and creates massively expansive discourses, in which racism often thrives. The responsibility of the developer has moved beyond simply extracting a game as a text and analysing it as an individual entity. These games require continued analysis by their developers as once an online community is generated the game environment often radically changes. Such a process is integral to responsible game design and without it online racism will continue to spread throughout cyberspace. However, responsibility does not completely fall on the developer, the player is also significantly involved in propagating online racism. The ability that they have to subvert online gaming environments and create racist discourses, that have the capacity to spread across the entire Internet, leads to the introduction of a new paradigm. I would argue that with the increasing complexity of online games, that the player is involved in a mutual development process. To an extent this allows the player to adopt the role of the developer, which in turn means that they need to be more accountable for their actions.

Chapter 2 – Virality of Racism in Online Gaming

2.1 – Introduction

> "When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell." (Dawkins 1989, p.192)

In this chapter I look at how racism in online games can spread virally and explore the impact that this can have on both online and the offline identities. Using a close analysis of what is now referred to as the Habbo /B/lockade, I will look at how the games' avatars were appropriated in an attempt to combat rumors of racist moderation, but in the process their efforts spread across the Internet and even back into the offline world. This process of mass dissemination has arguably created more racism than it ever prevented and exposes the contradicting/paradoxical nature of enlightened racism. In this instance the enlightened racism became a meme. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014) refers to a meme as "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture." Although, as mentioned by Dawkins in the opening quotation there is a parasitic nature to the manner in which these ideas spread. According to the Habbo Hotel website (2014):

> "Habbo Hotel is an online community for players 13 years or older where you create your very own Habbo character and design hotel rooms, You'll also meet new friends, chat, organise parties, look after virtual pets, create and play games and create quests. Lots of activities in the hotel will earn you badges too. Habbo is all about having fun with friends in a safe and exciting environment."

What is interesting about this platform is not only does it offer online games, but it also turns socialising online into a game. This adds a new dimension to the player's use of an avatar, although in this instance the customisation of the avatar is the point of inception for this meme. Hughes (2012) proposes that, "ideas are, to a very real extent, 'alive' in their own right – surviving, reproducing, evolving, going extinct, just like living things." If we are to synchronise such a vision with the manner in which racist memes have evolved from what was originally considered to be enlightened racism, the erosive power of this type of racism starts to become apparent.

2.2 – The Habbo /B/lockade

  It is impossible to explore the Habbo /B/lockade without referring to both 4chan and the Anonymous group. 4chan is an image-based bulletin board that allows users to post anonymously. The Anonymous group formed on 4chan and have since been involved with a variety of hacktivist operations, including the Habbo /B/lockade. According to Know Your Meme (2013), "sometime in 2006, rumors began to spread on 4chan's /b/ (random) board that Habbo's social moderators were prone to racial profiling against dark-skinned avatar users and abusing their ban powers to keep then out of the site". In an attempt to combat this racism a collection of 4chan users began blocking popular locations using the very avatars that the moderators were apparently banning from the site. What is interesting about this is that even though Habbo Hotel offers quite an extensive facility to customise your avatar, certain types of avatars were apparently being racially discriminated. Even if this was not the case, the Anonymous raids that ensued led to this type of avatar becoming a meme, which in turn led to negative representations of race being consumed both online and offline. Another purpose of this analysis is to point out the user's role in racist dissemination, as they are not always completely innocent.

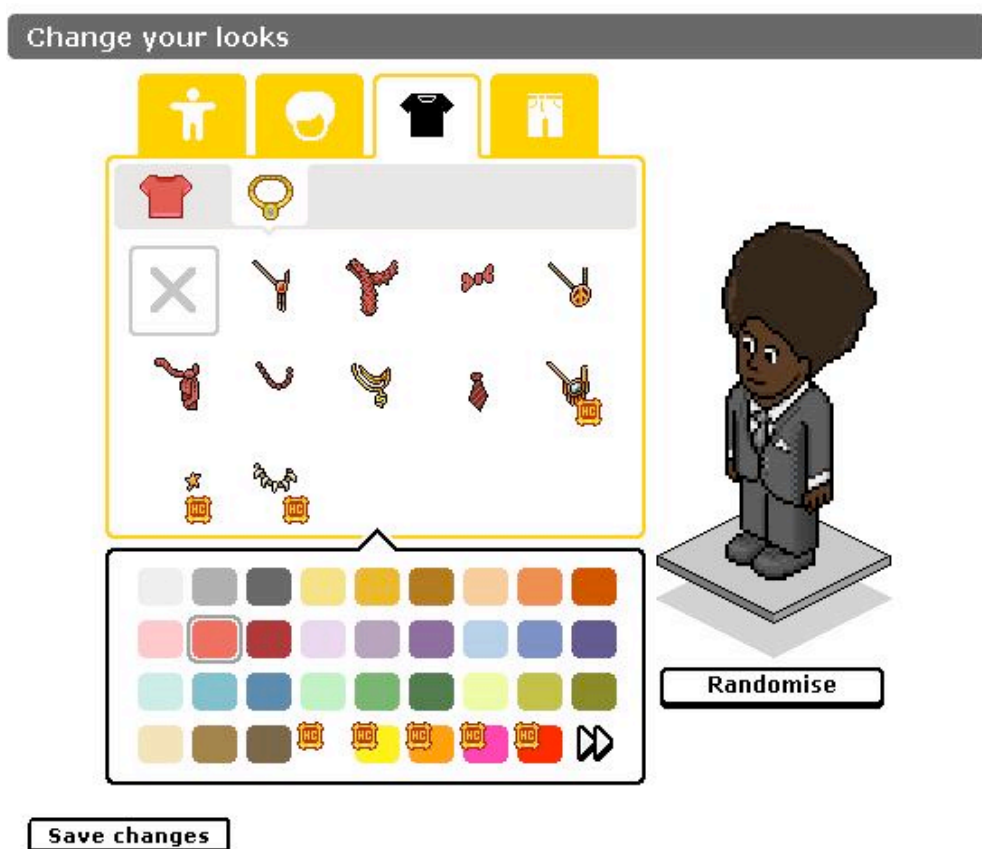

Figure 8: Nigra Avatar (Nigrapedia)

2.3 – Introducing the Term Nigra

The avatar that players used to combat the Habbo Hotel moderators generally consisted of a dark-skinned male with an afro wearing an Armani suit, although other variations exist (see Figure 8). What is interesting about this avatar adoption is that it became the source of racist griefing. This use of the player's online identity as a tool for hactivism, synchronises with a mob mentality that Anonymous appropriated into a militant racist griefing machine. The meme has the power for the individual to detach from the original idea, and instead focus on feeding its evolution without consideration for the impact its rapid dissemination might have. The avatar that Anonymous used as their soldier in the Habbo /B/lockade became referred to as a nigra. The obvious connotations surrounding this choice in name, combined with stereotypes being appropriated as weapons of racist griefing, creates a negative field for online racism to be confronted. The player cannot become the embodiment of that which they are contesting, even if it is in the name of parody.

2.4 – High-Tech Blackface

In an interview for The New York Times (1999) Powell referred to video games as "high-tech blackface". He went on to state that the player becomes, "aware of the moves that are programmed into the game. Any game has a certain stereotype, negative or positive, but a computer game is going to pass that message along pretty powerfully." Powell preempted a power that has been magnified by the continuing evolution of the Internet. In conjunction with this is how online games have shifted gaming from a private activity into a public one. This process allows networks of racism to disseminate from the user and then project across the world. On the website for Black Cultural Studies (1998) Diawara states that, "in the blackface myth, there is a white fantasy which posits whiteness as the norm". This normalisation of the white protagonist in games was presented in Figure 1. Like the blackface worn by minstrels from times gone by, the nigra can be interpreted as a similar entity. Although occupying a virtual space, the same drive towards humour exists without consideration of the racist representations that are invoked.

2.5 – Constructing the Other

As more users adopted the nigra avatar and began blocking popular locations it became increasingly complex and organised. It was not long before nigra users were issued with detailed instructions on how to perform inside of Habbo Hotel (Figure 9). Due to the regimental nature of these instructions I will analyse the role they play in transforming the nigra into a meme. From here I will expose the military obedience that coincides with this epidemic of racist griefing. After accepting the terms and conditions, Figure 9 outlines

how to construct a nigra avatar. This is an extremely specific process as without homogeny the impact of the nigra stereotype is lost. After accepting updates via banned@4chan.org and offered a tour, the user is then advised on where they should go. The intention here is for each nigra to enter the most densely populated rooms, so the largest number of players are impacted by the blockade. The final instructions relate to advising the user to shout at all times and how to operate the dance mechanics. The user is then informed to repeat the process if they are banned for breaking Habbo Hotel's code of conduct. There are many interesting aspects to these instructions:

- The cyclical nature of the instructions synchronises with the replicating nature of a meme.
- Customising the nigra is a generic process that equates a racist stereotype with homogeny.
- Mass dissemination is favoured over everything else.
- Moderator attempts to ban nigras are temporary and reinforce racist griefing.
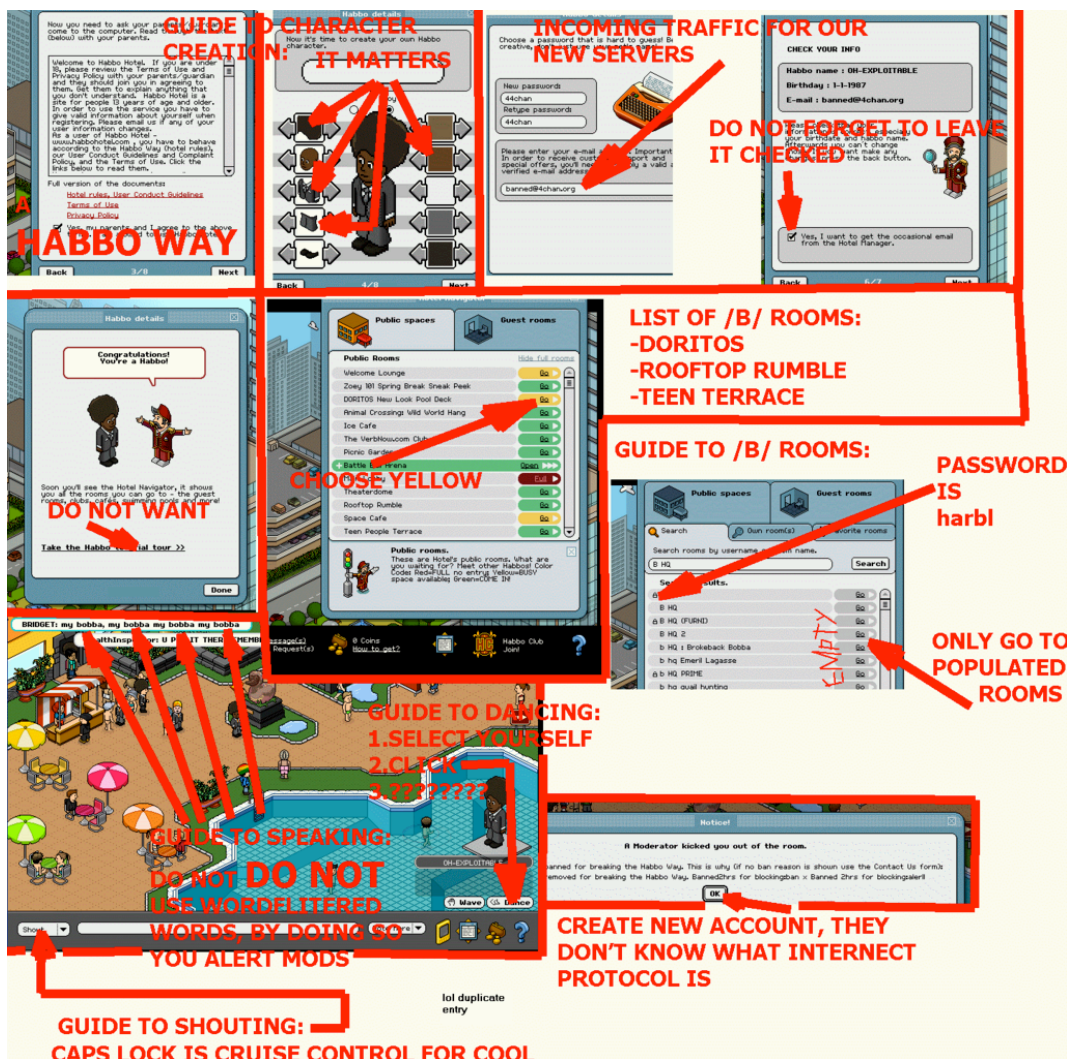

Figure 9: Pool's Closed Raid Instructions (Know Your Meme)

What are these points saying about the player's involvement in the dissemination of online racism? The key one here is the homogenisation of a racist stereotype. It is difficult to attach this type of avatar customisation to Nakamura's concept of *identity tourism*, as within this structure the player's identity is being chosen for them from multiple perspectives. The degree of customisation is limited to what the developers of the game have allowed them, but more importantly the user is subverting this process in favour of following a design template that promotes stereotyping over individuality. This subversion of the avatar, combined with the detailed instructions on how to turn the game into a racist griefing battlefield, shows how online environments have the ability to magnify the power of the individual. However, at the same time it gives insight into how the avatar is something that can be appropriated and used as a weapon by Anonymous for racist griefing. Such practices promote the expansion of memes, without consideration for the racist discourses that they can create.

2.6 – Strategies of Dissemination

Now that I have established how the nigra is constructed and discussed its role in terms of identity politics and how users are propagating a meme that is inherently racist, it is important that I refer to some examples of the strategies that were used in the Habbo /B/lockade. From here we will gain an insight into how the individual is effectively assimilated into a group, which subjugates a paradoxical attitude towards the user's involvement in their online actions. On one end, the meme requires each individual for it to effectively propagate, but once replicating the user's detachment from the implications of viral racist griefing becomes apparent. They do not feel responsible for that which they helped create. Hughes (2012) asks, "do we come up with ideas or do they, in fact, control us?" Such questions directly relate to the meme and our role in their creation. Although it is arguable that such viral ideas to an extent can control us, this control needs to be separated from their creation. I would contest that once becoming a meme that such ideas are out of the player's control, but this does not relegate them of responsibility. In the next section I will look at some of the strategies devised by the Anonymous group to subsume their nigras in racist griefing.

2.7 – The SwastiGET

According to the Habboraids website (2010) a SwastiGET, "is a formation done by Nigras while raiding Habbo. Nigras strategically line up to form a Swastika for shock value and lulz." A prime example of this formation can be seen in Figure 10.

Figure 10: SwastiGET Formation (Pool's Closed)

This process of adding a Swastika to the game is also present in contemporary online games. In COD: BO II a similar adoption of the Swastika is used by gamers, but rather than it being a highly orchestrated group activity, it becomes a customisable emblem that players brand themselves with (Figure 11). Although both forms of Swastika result with being banned, in each case there are interesting points to note. According to Encyclopedia Dramatica (2006), "Habbo Hotel has also proven to be racist as anyone who is black and is in the room is consequently banned during a blocking." The terminology in COD: BO II allows users with swastika emblems to form clans. Many argue that the blame lies at the hands of the developers, who provide the facility for gamers to create these racist emblems, but the interest in creating these Swastikas is being generated by the game's users. After looking at YouTube it became apparent that multiple video tutorials on how to create Swastika emblems exist, and their view counts collectively go into the hundreds of thousands. Although not conclusive evidence, it does show the interest that exists towards the creation of racist emblems, or at least to the extent the phenomenon has managed to spread on the Internet. Within this debate

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there are two types of user. The "hardcore" users who are motivated as it forms part of their personal ideologies and then there are the "softcore" users. This category generally refers to the younger, less informed user, who thinks it is "funny" and/or "cool" to promote such emblems. These users are where most concerns lie, as they make up the widest user base in online gaming and their lack of knowledge allows such racist symbols to become part of the game's online community.

Figure 11: Swastika Emblem in Call of Duty: Black Ops II (YouTube)

2.8 – Pool's Closed

The manner in which all in-game black avatars are banned for nigras creating Swastikas assists in creating a paradoxical cycle. This excessive moderation reinforces the motives of the nigras and amplifies their attempts at racist griefing. One of the core strategies that Anonymous used in their attack on Habbo Hotel was known as pool blocking. This refers to groups of nigras congregating around in-game pools in order to prevent users from entering these social hangout areas (Figure 12). The phrase "Pool's Closed" became synonymous with Anonymous' exploitation of a technical issue, which disallowed users to pass through spaces occupied by another avatar, but more importantly it became the tagline for the meme that not only spread across the entire Internet, but also extended into the real world. The ability for racism to travel via a meme across the Internet and into the real world indicates the power that racism in online games has. It also

justifies looking at occurrences in COD: BO II, such as the avatar, racist griefing, live-streaming and even racist emblems. The reason for this is that all of these elements are the locations from which online racism stems.

Figure 12: Nigras Closing Pool (Opera Two Point Oh)

2.9 – Reenactments in Real Life

 The "Pool's Closed" meme not only spread virally across the entire Internet, but it also had an impact on the offline world. One example of this effect would be how the nigra migrated from the world of Habbo Hotel and out into anime and Internet culture conventions (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Nigra Costumes (Order, Conflict, & Unrest in Virtual Worlds)

This mapping of an online avatar onto a person's physical body is an interesting, but shocking phenomenon. It effectively serves the belief that avatars function as locations in which offline identities are projected onto, functioning more as alter-egos than places in which completely new identities are being formed/experienced. What is disconcerting about the real life reenactments of the nigra avatar, is that these individuals are transgressing racist griefing and exposing the dangers surrounding this practice, while sustaining the growth of the meme. Inside of this process I would argue that Powell"s (1999) term "high-tech blackface" is revoked to classic black-face, which has been normalised by the culture of racist griefing that exists online. The reason for this is that even though the nigra avatar started as a virtual representation of identity, some player's have physically adopted it as an offensive parody of racial identity (see Figure 13).

2.10 – Offline Formations

With the "Pool's Closed" meme migrating into the offline realm many of the strategies that I have already discussed moved with it. One of the most controversial of these is the SwastiGET being created by groups of people dressed up as nigras (see Figure 14).
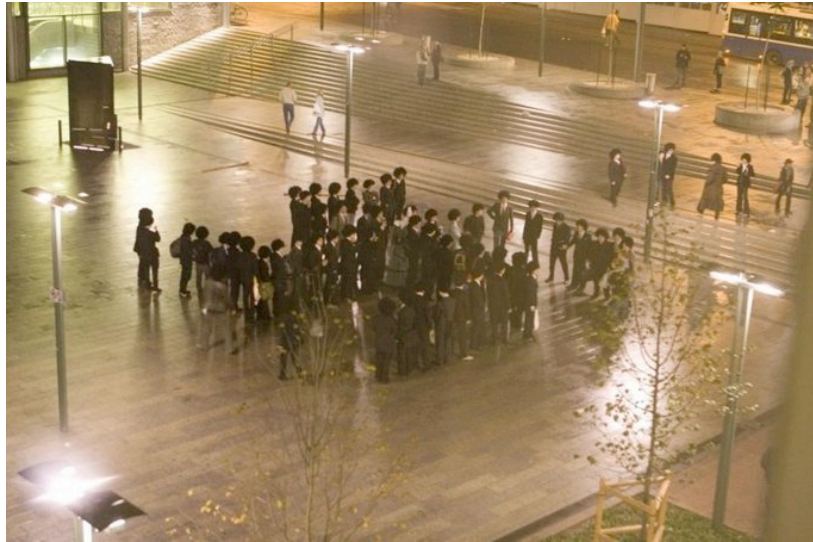
21

Figure 14: SwastiGET Formation (Know Your Meme)

   The creation of these racist symbols by people dressed as stereotype ridden memes actualises Kang's (2000, p.1135) postulation that, "if cyberspace's repressive possibilities materialise, racial subordination will be reinforced." Embedded within this act of racist griefing is an enlightening visualisation of how far online racism can spread. The meme has the power for the individual to detach from the original idea, and instead focus on feeding its evolution without consideration for the impact its rapid dissemination might have. To reify this notion of the viral spread of online racism, we must condense our approach to both the individual and the developer, as once viral spread ensues responsibility becomes as abstract a concept as the meme itself. However, memes do assist in demonstrating the transformative power that the Internet can have on racial representation and racist griefing.

Figure 15: Pool's Closed Sign (Know Your Meme)

Another transition of this meme into the real world saw people printing "Pool's Closed" signs with a personified nigra on them (Figure 15). These were then hung up at swimming pools as an attempt to extend the meme into the real world. According to Know Your Meme (2006), " in early 2008, a Texan named Mary Alice Altorfer came across a "Pool's Closed" sign in her neighborhood and called the local news station with a claim that it was promoting racial discrimination." After this report was uploaded onto YouTube, Anonymous "launched a harassment campaign against the woman". The absurd nature of this situation reflects how memes can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives, while mobilising both online and offline identities to propagate their rapid growth. The original idea often loses its meaning and the focus shifts to one particular aspect of the idea. In the case of memes that invoke varying degrees of racism, the stereotype is generally positioned as a location of humour, which is then used as a catalyst for growth. People, who find the meme funny, share it on the Internet, which allows these stereotypes to spread virally and be consumed by a mass audience.

2.11 – The Purpose of Analysing a Meme

In this chapter I used the Habbo /B/lockade as a case study to explore the methods in which online racism spreads. I focused on the "Pool's Closed" meme and its position as a mass propagator of racial discord. The manner in which memes assimilate stereotypes and harness both online and offline identities in an attempt to spread ideas, quantifies concerns surrounding racism in online games. The role of both the developer and the user are pivotal in terms of establishing online games that have a more responsible and considerate approach to the content of the game, but more importantly to the design and use of the environments that online communities inhabit. The first component that I looked at is how a user's avatar can be militarised and used as a weapon that promotes racial subordination. From this I looked at how this avatar can be interpreted as a modern day version of blackface. Such an interpretation highlights the unstable positioning of race in cyberspace and the need for the content in online games to be taken more seriously. Relating back to Nakamura's concept of *identity tourism*, I explored the contradicting nature of player agency within this environment. The player operates under the illusion of control, but this is subverted in favour of harnessing their racist griefing, which in turn becomes a meme. The question to ask here is who is responsible for this dissemination? Is it the player, developer, Anonymous or is it the meme itself? This is an impossible question to answer, but still lies at the center of interpreting how racism in online games spreads. The primary purpose of this analysis is to draw attention to how racism in games radically transforms when applied to the online realm. The inherent lack of academic work concerning this area and the general structure of ludological analyses, do little to promote engagement with such an important aspect of contemporary game studies.

The final idea that I focused on in this chapter was the strategies that Anonymous implemented in order to promote the dissemination of this meme. This created a platform to discuss the responsibility of the player and the developer within a meme-based environment, while exploring the migration of this meme into the real world and the impact that this can have. The "Pool's Closed" meme serves as a perfect example to expose the power of racism in online games. It also challenges issues of agency that promote expansion of racism. Within many current online games there exists a structure where none of the actuators of online racism are held directly accountable, which is one of the primary reasons why confronting racism in online games is such a difficult area to navigate. Analysing racist memes ultimately assists in deconstructing the role of both the player and the developer, which gives us unique insight into the role they play in the creation of racism. In the next chapter I will look more closely at issues of agency.

Chapter 3 – Questions of Agency

3.1 – Introduction

  In the first chapter of this research paper I referred to the culpability of the developer in terms of responsible game design. Having looked at the virality of racism in online games it has become apparent that although this is necessary, such accountability is skewed by the multi-faceted and dynamic nature of online games that exist in conjunction with complex systems of control. In this chapter I focus on the four primary systems that relate to racism in online games. McAllister (2006, p.45) states that, "every computer game begins with an agent: someone – or some collective – is always behind the management of meaning". According to Schulzke (2012) McAllister argues, "that there are four types of agents involved in constituting the meaning of games: developers, marketers, virtual agents, and players." Due to this research paper specifically aligning with depictions of racism in online video games and limitations concerning its length, I have chosen to specifically analyse the following agents: Anonymous, memes, developers, and players. The intention of this is to give a unique insight into some of the agents that I consider more applicable to the area of online games, while offering a different perspective on how they can be analysed. From here we can begin to extract a sense of why it is necessary to approach online games as an entirely different section of video game analysis. In addition to this, we can begin to interpret the varying networks of racism that exist within online games.

3.2 – Anonymous: Mob Mentality or Place of Cultural Convergence?

  I looked at Anonymous' involvement in meme construction in Chapter 2, but did not elaborate on the subject of player agency. As players become more involved in online communities it is easy for their identities to become blurred, which allows room for players to disassociate themselves with their actions online. The Anonymous group is the most overt example of how online gaming communities can be appropriated and involved in discourses beyond their game environments. What I want to interrogate is where the player is placed within this structure in terms of being liable for their actions. Many consider Anonymous to be associated with a mob mentality, what I mean by this is that the group are being led by individuals who are influencing them to engage in activities, that would commonly be outside of their nature. Inside this mode of understanding, it is easy to interpret the individual as a victim and therefore any racism that is propagated due to their actions is unintentional. However, this method of approach assumes that Anonymous is composed of a hierarchical power structure. The Financial Times Lexicon (2014) refers to Anonymous as being, "an amorphous group of hacktivists." This definition subjugates the hierarchical

vision of Anonymous in favour of a system that is more aligned with Cultural Convergence Theory. Kryp3ia (2011) refers to such an approach when they say that Cultural Convergence Theory has, "a more nuanced approach to understanding that like-minded individuals congregate together socially and then as a crowd, act out on their collective consciousness." In aligning with an amorphous approach to Anonymous the impact of the player's involvement with racist griefing becomes more apparent. According to Kincaid (2009) the term convergence is defined as "movements towards one point, towards another communicator, towards a common interest, and toward greater uniformity, never quite reaching that point". This idea that the point is never reached could be an indicator of why it is so difficult to position an individual within this structure, and offers insight into the liminal nature of Anonymous. However, this structure also exposes the fact that every individual is responsible for their actions, even if they are effectively masked by their involvement within anonymous communities. Online anonymity also assists in the creation of memes, which raises the question what involvement do the other agents of meaning have with memes? This will be explored in more depth in the next section.

3.3 – The Role of the Meme

  In Chapter 2 I referred to memes as locations that challenge agency. The reason for this is that their viral nature allows other responsible agents to disengage from their roles in the creation of online racism. However, what I am yet to query is to whether or not memes have agency and if so what impact does this have on the agents that precede them? Princeton's (2014) website that deals with the area of memetics refers to the meme as, "a pattern that can influence its surroundings – that is, it has causal agency – and can propagate". Causal agency refers to any entity that is responsible for events or results. If we are to take this approach then are we to interpret memes as autonomous entities? Without being able to establish a sense of causality it is difficult to interrogate the various benefactors of online racism. However, if we are to approach this agency from a different perspective, then arguably both approaches can be integrated. Memes can be interpreted as autonomous agents, but when assessing how they are formed, all of the components involved inherit a parental role. Thus, when the impact of the meme is being analysed all of the components that led to its formation will be accountable for their role in its creation. In other words, it allows us scope to assess the accountability of both the individual and the developer, in terms of their involvement in the construction of online racism.

<u>3.4 – The Agency of the Player</u>

Marcus Schulzke's essay on "*Models of Agency in Game Studies*" (2012) offers an interesting insight into player control in games. His overall belief is that there are three interpretations of agency in game studies. The first of these is determinism, which he defines as, "a weak view of player autonomy that does not accurately represent players' capacity to judge the games they play and to resist the influence of new information". Such an approach applied to racism in online games would mark player involvement as a passive activity, were they are not responsible for their actions. The second interpretation that Schulzke (2012) refers to is voluntarism, which is referred to as the opposite of determinism. Schulzke establishes this binary when he states that, "voluntarism is guilty of the opposite fault: overestimating players' autonomy and their imperviousness to new information". Within this structure the responsibility of the player is recognised, but it also establishes them as being impervious to any influence that comes from the game. Such an approach in turn detaches the developer from taking any responsibility for that which they create and places everything in the hands of the player. I would align myself with Schulzke's opinion that there exists a hybrid of these two forms, which he refers to as "taking a centrist view of agency". Both perspectives have merit in terms of giving insight into player agency, allowing for a piecemeal approach that accommodates my view of the mutual relationship that exists in online games, one that allows the player to adopt the role of the developer. Schulzke (2012) argues that, "such a middle position can be formulated by drawing on the insights of the determinist and voluntarist perspectives while acknowledging and avoiding some of the mistaken assumptions that are associated with these positions". For the purpose of this paper I am going to apply this centrist view of agency to COD: BO II in an attempt to uncover the individual's role in the creation of online racism.

<u>3.5 – Under Cover of Determinism</u>

Starting with determinism, it is easy to see how when confronting issues such as player's avatars, racist griefing and the live-streaming of games that players can adopt a passive attitude towards online racism. Such an approach allows them to disengage with issues of responsibility and any concerns that do exist are generally transferred to being the responsibility of either the developer or the online community as a collective entity. However, I would argue that the deterministic model also allows players to not have to consider the repercussions of their actions online, which is becoming an increasingly dangerous activity as the complexity of online games continues to grow. Darkademic's (2014) article on "*Online Multiplayer Games as Social Environments*" states that, "individuals who enter the realm of online multiplayer gaming do not do so as a blank-slate; they already possess their own views, ways of acting, temperament and values

and will use the medium accordingly". Such an approach refutes Nakamura's (2000) concept of *identity tourism* and aligns the player's engagement with online gaming environments as a platform to extend and explore themselves more extensively. Although the concern here is that their use of the medium often promotes online racism, but determinism allows players to detach from their actions online. After previously looking at Anonymous and memes as agents involved in the creation of online racism, one could interpret the online game itself as having agency, but such an approach would be a reductionist activity that merely obfuscates the topic. Darkademic (2014) resists such an activity when they state that, "online gaming itself has no agency, only characteristics which are interpreted and responded to by the actor – the player." This approach creates a sphere in which we can critically engage with the actions of the player online, but it fails to assert the position of the developer within this dialogue.

3.6 – The Voluntarist Approach

If we are to now interpret the role of the player from a voluntarist perspective then the racist actions that occur in COD: BO II are the sole responsibility of the player. From their use of racist decals, oppositional racism between avatars, racist griefing and live-streaming that extends many of these dialogues into realms where they can be further appropriated, each user that is involved is effectively promoting racism. In addition to this any users that are turning a blind eye to this should be held equally accountable. This method of approach is great in theory, but it does little to acknowledge the role of the developer within this structure. Many of the areas where racism thrives in COD: BO II could be managed more effectively by the developer. They create all of the systems that players use to enact online racism, so should they not be the ones most responsible? It is here that the voluntarist approach starts to dissolve, as although it is important to expose the player's involvement in online racism, poor moderation practices and online anonymity makes such exposure practically impossible.

3.7 – A Centrist View of Agency

To interpret both determinist and voluntarist approaches in COD: BO II, I would argue that together they serve to expose many of the conflicts that exist within online games. In taking a determinist approach I came to the conclusion that it asserts disassociation between the player and their actions. In opposition to this the voluntarist approach is more of a player-centric approach, but this does little to account for the other agents that are involved. Between both of these approaches we can begin to dissect the player's involvement in online racism, while also being aware of the overarching role of the developer.

In terms of agency, I would argue that the developer is the primary benefactor of online racism, but in a lot of cases this is not an intentional activity. Their design decisions create environments where virtual identities are housed, possibly subverted and inevitably shared across the Internet. Although online players often adopt the role of the creator, they are merely working within the limits of what the developer has provided them with. For this reason it is integral that we assess the role of the developer in the creation of online racism. Some developers' primary focus is the creation of racist content, although this reflects a minute section of the industry. A prime example of such a practice would be the game developer Resistance Records, whose sole intention is to create games that promote the ideologies of white supremacy, while offering an opportunity to conscript younger less informed individuals through the allure of video games. However, for the purpose of this research paper I am concerned with mainstream developers that are offering a more covert type of racism, one that is generally not directly intended. Although, due to their large online gaming communities, I would argue that online games in particular, hold a greater potential to spread racist discourses. Especially given the fact that players will subvert the games' content and assist in making them spread virally. The problem here is that even if the developer amends the content they create, it is impossible to contain the racism created from it existing in the first place.

3.9 – Insensitive Reference to Allah in Modern Warfare 2

In late 2012, a Muslim gamer posted a video message to the developer of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (Infinity Ward). In this video he streamed content from the game, which shows Arabic writing on a picture frame hanging above a toilet in the online multiplayer map called Favela (see Figures 16-17).

Figure 16: Favela Bathroom Scene (YouTube)

Figure 17: Zoom View of Arabic Writing on Frame (YouTube)

The video game website Kotaku (2012) confirmed that the writing said, "Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty". The problem surrounding this being included in the online map is that, "it can be offensive to those of Islamic faith … to see holy teachings written on or in a bathroom". Infinity Ward were incredibly quick to apologise and take the level offline until the textures had been updated to no longer contain the writing. However, the fact that the level had been taken offline for amendments created outrage amongst the gaming community. What ensued was a barrage of racist comments towards Middle Eastern people, ones that privileged race over the initial objection, which was based on a religious misunderstanding. The purpose of this point is to highlight that even though the game developer took responsibility for their actions and amended the problem that was causing outrage amongst Muslims. Their actions invoked a negative response from other users, which inevitably led to racist responses circulating within any site that was covering the topic. The extent of which led to the original YouTube poster having to disable the comments on his video upload.

This example shows the importance of considerate game design, especially in the context of an online game with such a large audience. Not only does racist content rapidly spread, it is impossible to revoke it once it has entered the online game world. For this reason I would argue that the developer is the primary source of agency, but in the realm of online games this is spread across a network of agents e.g. the player, Anonymous and memes… This not only assists in complicating positioning who is responsible for the creation and dissemination of racist content, but also aligns with the paradoxical nature of racism in contemporary society. However, such complexity should not nullify attempts at analysing and understanding racism in online games, if anything it should epitomise the necessity of this practice. Otherwise racist discourses will continue to grow inside online gaming communities, further developing griefing cultures to the point where we will become completely desensitised to racism.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research paper was to critically engage with the complex networks where racism exists, but what are the benefits from doing this? In a time where online gaming is undergoing exponential growth and video games currently hold the highest growth rate amongst all other forms of entertainment (see Figure 18), I believe it is time that we explore the impact that this medium is having on its players. Although ludology offers a critical approach to games, particular topics such as violence and misogyny have a tendency to dominate discourses, while the presence of racism in video games has become a grossly neglected area of study.
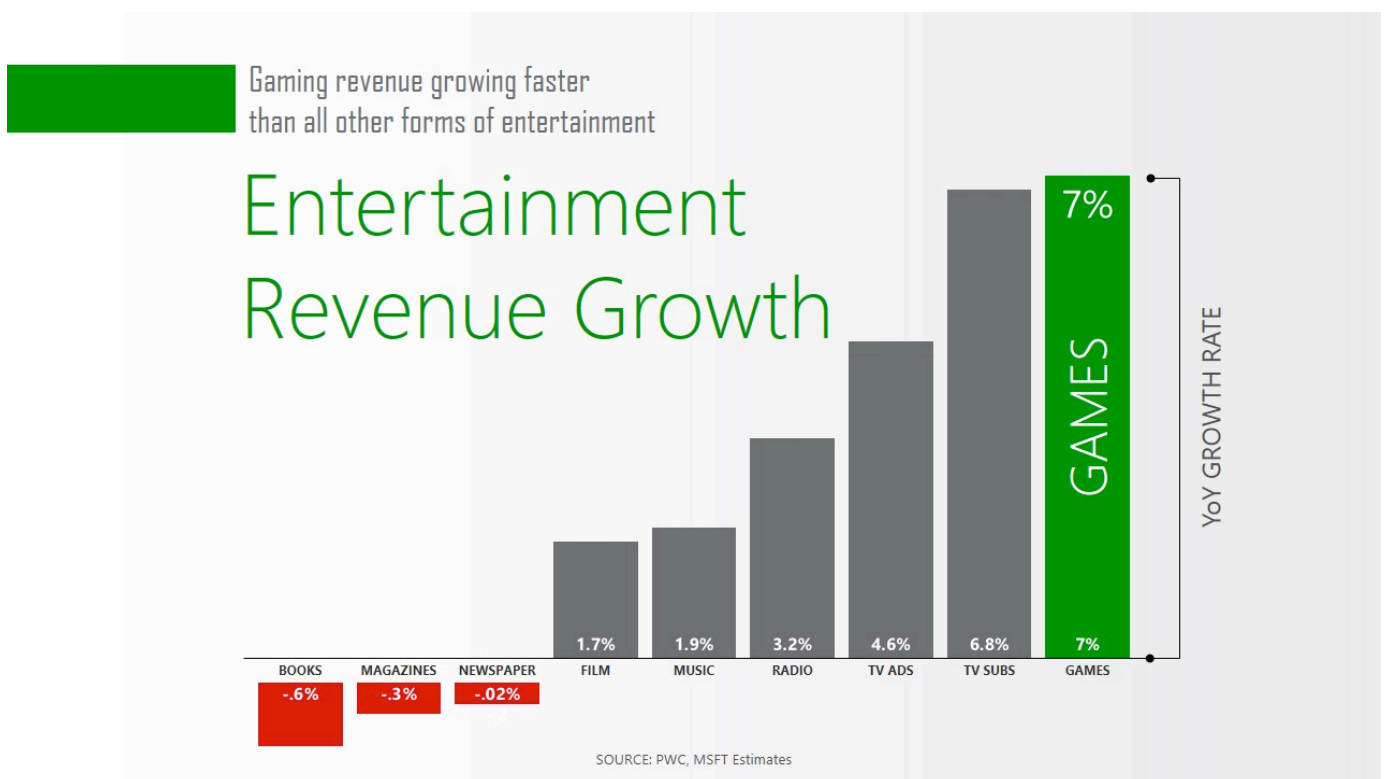

Figure 18: Entertainment Revenue Growth (Xbox Wire)

Having researched racism in video games, it has become increasingly obvious that very little research has been completed on the impact of racism in online games. According to statistics provided by Xbox's official website, as of 2013 over 1 billion people play games worldwide (see Figure 19). Given that this is over 14% of the world's population, it is unusual that racism in online games is not an area that is being extensively explored. Throughout this paper I have referred to an inherent gap that exists within ludology and I believe the fact that online games are not approached as separate entities is a testament to this. A structuralist

approach does not accommodate the transitional nature of online games (the lack of ludological analyses using contemporary online games as their examples, supports this postulation).
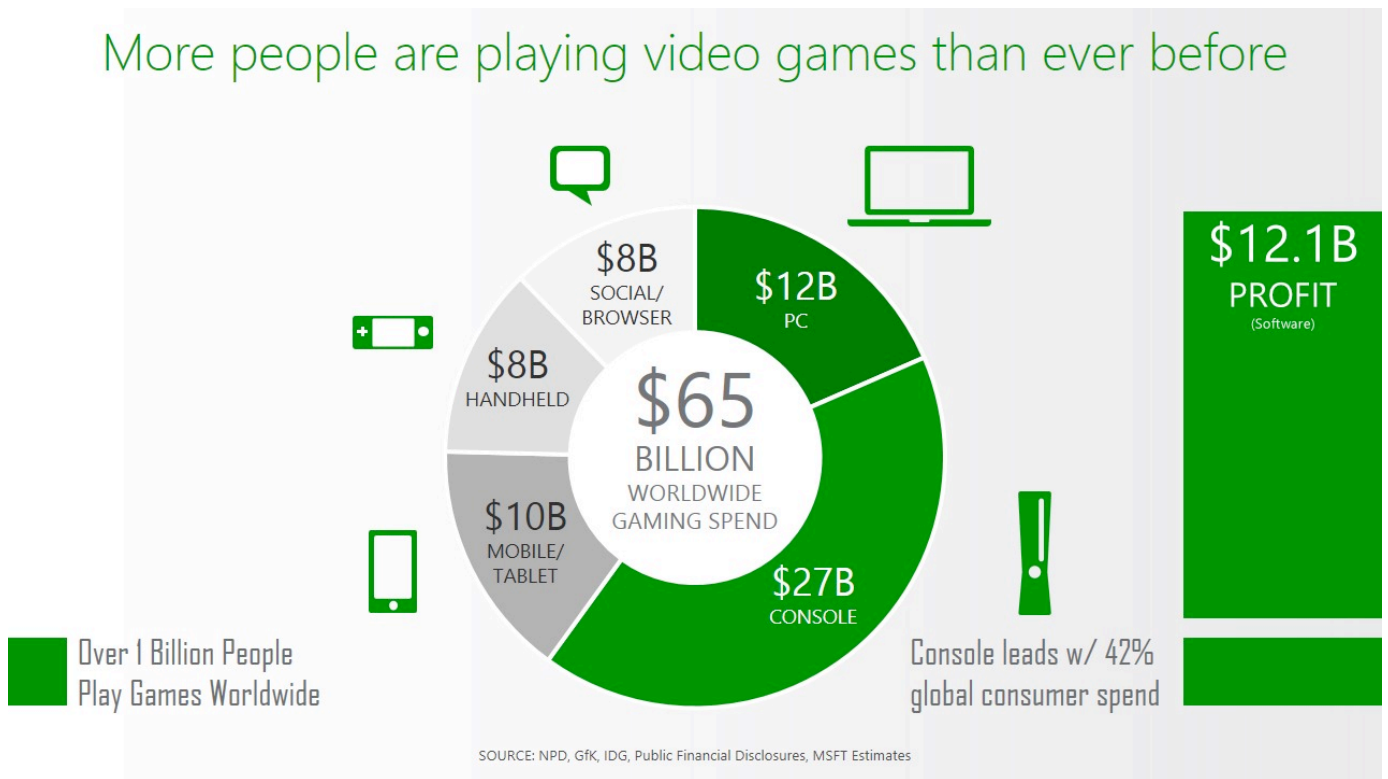

Figure 19: Worldwide Gaming Spend (Xbox Wire)

To explore the networks of racism in online games I opted to breakdown my approach into three chapters, each of which focused on a particular aspect of online racism. In the first chapter I focused on the avatar as the location where online identities are formed. The purpose of this was to initiate a discussion where I would explore the player's involvement in the creation of racism. I explored avatars as sites of racist propagation, racist griefing and the idea that online racism is humorous, and finally live-streaming and the player's involvement in disseminating racist content across the Internet. COD: BO II was the primary game that was used as a case study to address the presence of these components. To summarise the results of this chapter, I would argue that the complexity of online games has led to the creation of an environment where the player is mutually involved in creating the online worlds that they inhabit, but there are limitations to the amount of control that they have. However, this method of approach acknowledges the accountability of the player in terms of creating and spreading racism online, rather than viewing them as passive participants.

In the second chapter, I explored how online racism can spread virally. The purpose of this was to indicate the potential for racism to spread rapidly across the Internet, due to the synonymous nature of the

relationship that exists between online games and the Internet. This assisted in validating the importance of assessing the presence of racism in online games, while giving insight into why online games need to be approached differently to offline video games. I chose to look at a meme called "Pool's Closed". The reasoning behind this was to look at a more extreme example of how an idea can spread across the online realm, while investigating the knock-on effect that exists, between online and offline depictions of racism. It also allows us to deconstruct the role that both the player and the developer play in the construction of racism.

Stemming directly from this, the focus of the final chapter is to address the questions of agency that surrounds each of the systems involved in generating online racism. To initiate this I explored the players' involvement in Anonymous and what impact this has on players being accountable for their actions. Framing this within Cultural Convergence Theory, I ascertained that although Anonymous creates a liminal space in which player identity and responsibility can be blurred, they are still responsible for the content of the ideas that they create. I explored the role of the meme within this debate and concluded that although the meme can be perceived as an autonomous agent, its ability to infect and spread subverted ideas across the Internet, justifies focusing on the agents involved in its formation, these being the player and the developer. To explore the agency of the player, I chose to apply Schulzke's idea that there are three ways in which we can engage with agency. Although, after critically engaging with determinism and voluntarism, I concluded that the most appropriate approach is a centrist view, which operates as an aggregation of these two approaches. This allows us to engage with the role of the player, while allowing the role of the developer to be involved in this dialogue. Finally, I chose to look at the developer's role in the construction of racism online. It is here that I aligned myself with the belief that the developer is the primary instigator of online racism, but this does not mean that it is a planned process. In fact, I would argue that the dominant racist discourses that are produced in online games are a result of a neglectful attitude towards the content that is being created. I demonstrated this argument by referring to the inclusion of Arabic phrases in a bathroom in one of the online multiplayer maps in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. The manner in which the developer efficiently fixed these issues does not change the fact that once racist content exists it is impossible to calculate the racist discourses that result from its existence.

Ultimately, the purpose of this research paper is to engage with the different networks that create, disseminate and propagate racism in online games. These networks refer to the following agents: Anonymous, memes, the player and the developer. Quintessentially, the online nature of these games has irrevocably changed how we interact with one another. In an ever-growing global community of racially diverse players, online racism is rampant. Considering this, the question remains now whether racism in

online games is a repackaging of old ideologies in a new format, or are these networks offering a new form of racism, one that stems from the virtual space? The presence of racism in online games is a lot more prevalent than one would think. I argue that it is being assimilated as a form of entertainment through the process of play. This allows for discreet dissemination across multiple networks, while creating an environment where nobody feels accountable for their actions.

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